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## Title page

# Interpreting impoliteness and over-politeness: An investigation into interpreters' cognitive effort, coping strategies and their effects

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## Highlights:

1. Impolite/over-polite utterances entailed extra cognitive effort by interpreters.
2. Coping strategies beyond literal interpreting were adopted by interpreters.
3. Professionals used more syntactic coping strategies and omission than students.
4. Politeness is redefined from interlingual and cross-cultural perspectives.
5. The concept of “pragmatic competence” is introduced into interpreting studies.

## **Interpreting impoliteness and over-politeness: An investigation into interpreters' cognitive effort, coping strategies and their effects**

**Abstract:** This paper investigates how politeness is treated in interpreter-mediated events and how the treatment is related to interpreters' pragmatic competence. An empirical study was conducted for this purpose, in which twenty-two professional and student interpreters were asked to work in a liaison interpreting mode. An analysis of the interpreters' cognitive effort involved (i.e. the interpreting process) and the coping strategies employed (i.e. the interpreting product) in dealing with impolite and over-polite utterances, together with their retrospections, produced three findings: 1) Impolite and over-polite utterances slowed down the processing speed of interpreting, indicating that more cognitive effort was involved. Professionals were particularly affected when interpreting from English to Chinese, students the opposite direction. 2) Various coping strategies beyond literal interpreting were adopted by both groups. Professionals used coping strategies more liberally and intentionally than students, especially syntactic ones and omission. 3) The overriding majority of the strategies succeeded in mitigating the face-threatening force implied in the utterances. The differences between the two groups are explained by their different levels of intercultural pragmatic competence. This study contributes to the interlingual and cross-cultural study of politeness, and the exploration of the complexity of the interpreter's role.

**Keywords:** liaison interpreting, impoliteness, over-politeness, cognitive effort, coping strategies and effects, intercultural pragmatic competence

## 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, 'politeness' has been a key notion in pragmatics. Various theoretical models have been proposed (e.g., Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003) in which politeness has generally been defined as static, fixed and pre-given (Chan et al., 2018), usually in a monolingual setting. However, cross-cultural work in a wide range of languages and cultures has highlighted the socio-cultural variations in the interpretations of politeness and has begun to conceptualize it as a relational and interactional phenomenon which is discursively constructed and negotiated among interlocutors (e.g., Locher, 2004; Arundale, 2006; Chan et al., 2018). In line with this approach, we conducted an empirical study into politeness in interpreter-mediated events. As a fairly recent topic in interpreting research, politeness has not yet received the attention it deserves: the few studies that have been conducted have focused primarily on conference and court interpreting, and resorted to conversation analysis as the sole research methodology (e.g., Mason & Stewart, 2001; Jacobsen, 2008; Magnifico & Defrancq, 2016). The qualitative and product-oriented approaches adopted in these case studies, however, may not be adequate to reveal how interpreters perceive their pragmatic roles in balancing their translational and non-translational interventions when dealing with politeness, or more broadly, how they participate in the "complex co-construction of interaction" (e.g., Wadensjö, 1998; Angelelli, 2003; Mason, 2008).

In our study, liaison interpreting<sup>1</sup> was chosen as it "has the most observable and apparent contexts of the dynamics of participants' interactions among all forms of translation and interpretation" (Hsieh, 2003: 303). We took impoliteness and over-politeness as two forms of politeness-related evaluations that may arise as challenges in the communicative events being interpreted (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). By examining these two sub-branches of politeness, we aim to contribute to a dynamic understanding of how interpreters perceive and deal with linguistic politeness in multilingual and intercultural events.

In the following sections, we first explain how impolite and over-polite utterances (hereinafter as I&Os) were selected and investigated in the present study. We then analyse the interpreters' treatment of the I&Os by interweaving the product and the process-based approaches. By relating the findings to the interpreters' pragmatic competence, or to be more exact, their intercultural pragmatic competence (McConachy,

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<sup>1</sup> Liaison interpreting is classified as an interpreting activity different from conference interpreting, which features communicative events where two or more interlocutors do not share a language and where the interpreter must be present and perform interpreting in both language directions (Stanislav, 1997).

2019), the study demonstrates an interdisciplinary combination of pragmatics and interpreting studies, and calls for the inclusion of pragmatic competence as part of an interpreter's skill set.

## **2. Research background**

### **2.1 Politeness, impoliteness and over-politeness in pragmatics**

Most studies into politeness over the last few decades have been in some way related to Brown and Levinson's (1987) study, which argued that positive face (the want to be desirable) and negative face (the want to maintain freedom of action) exist universally in all types of human culture, and that politeness<sup>2</sup> is a means of mitigating threats to face and of maintaining face in everyday interactions. This perspective, while rightly acknowledging face as a key concept in defining politeness-related concepts, has been challenged by many researchers as "depersonalized and decontextualized" (Alan, 2015: 397). For example, Fraser and Nolan (1981), Watts (2003) and Locher (2004) argued convincingly that politeness is a socially-oriented judgment: that no linguistic structure is inherently polite or impolite, and that linguistic (im)politeness needs to be studied within the social psychological context in which it occurs. Matsumoto (1988), Ide (1989), Gu (1990), to name but a few, argued that the notion of negative politeness derives directly from the individuality of the western culture where individual wants and autonomy strongly dominate; however, it may not be applicable to non-western societies, such as Japan and China, where there prevails the need to heed social hierarchy and moral/ethical values.

Impoliteness, the opposite of politeness or the absence of politeness where it is expected (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Eelen, 2001), has been researched to a lesser extent. The emerging body of research has demonstrated that, although sometimes presented as a conscious strategy designed to cause social disruption (Bousfield, 2008), impoliteness usually results from a mismatch between the speaker's intentions and the hearers' expectations (House, 2012), especially in the case of cross-cultural communication (e.g., Culpeper et al., 2010). For instance, Brown and Levinson's (1987) inclusion of speech acts such as offers and requests in the category of negative face-threatening acts (FTAs) has been challenged by researchers in Japan and China (e.g., Matsumoto, 1988; Gu, 1990), as it ignores the interpersonal or social perspective on face, which is of paramount concern to a Japanese or a Chinese.

The comparatively under-researched notion of over-politeness can be defined as a type of behaviour which is evaluated as too polite for the context (Izadi, 2016). It is labelled as a negative aspect of interaction (Watts, 2003; Locher, 2004), akin to

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<sup>2</sup> This includes positive politeness construed as appreciation and approval, and negative politeness as non-imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

impoliteness, as both “exceed the boundary between appropriateness and inappropriateness” (Locher, 2004: 90). This argument was supported by Izadi (2016), whose study of “Taarof”, an Iranian form of over-politeness emphasizing both deference and social rank, revealed that paying too much attention to relational bonding could be evaluated as irrelevant and creating more separatedness. However, what is considered in/appropriate in a particular situation depends on the evaluations of the social behaviour by the participants and meta-participants (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Izadi 2015). Culpeper (2009), for instance, observed from multimedia data that in Britain over-politeness is rarely taken offensively, but usually as a matter of miscommunication. Gu (1990) observed that a successful performance of inviting usually takes several talk exchanges in China, a phenomenon described as “battles for politeness” by Leech (2005); yet to a cultural outsider, the inviter might appear imposing/over-polite and the invitee hypocritically making fake refusals.

## **2.2 Politeness, impoliteness and over-politeness in interpreting**

Before proceeding to liaison interpreters’ treatment of politeness, we may need to recognize and address the complexity of their roles, “one of the most prominent topics in interpreting studies” (Pöchhacker, 2004: 147). Though the interpreter has long been prescribed as an invisible translating machine by professional codes of ethics (Pöchhacker, 2004), recent observational and survey studies revealed that there exists a discrepancy between the prescribed role and the actual one: more and more interpreters perceived, enacted and described their role as visible agents, or ‘essential partners’, ‘co-constructors to the interaction’, who actively intervene, assuming an additional role of mediators (cultural mediators in particular) besides transmitting the message (e.g. Wadensjö, 1998; Roy, 2000; Angelelli, 2003; Katan, 2004). Along with the role perceptions of interpreters, the expectations from their clients have also evolved. Surveys with healthcare social workers and judicial officers unraveled that despite the concerns over interpreters’ overstepping their roles, a majority of them welcomed the added assistance from interpreters and supported the framing of interpreters as active co-participants (Pöchhacker, 2000; Hale, 2014).

If the practitioners and users of interpreting have agreed that the mediating/coordinating function needs to be included into the interpreter’s role and that a good interpreter needs to interpret at the pragmatic level (Hale, 2007), it is important to understand how interpreters coordinate facework in the communication events. However, though politeness is a ubiquitous and prominent phenomenon in interpreter-mediated events, there is an obvious paucity of studies focusing exclusively on politeness-related issues in interpreting. Rather, they have surfaced in works primarily concerned with other issues. The early studies (Harris & Sherwood, 1978; Knapp-Potthof & Knapp, 1986)

focused on untrained interpreters and revealed that they were intuitively aware of the need to pay attention to the issue of face, especially their own faces, by clearly dissociating themselves from FTAs. Mason and Stewart (2001), Jacobsen (2008) and Monacelli (2009) drew a similar conclusion from their observation of professional interpreters that they also performed face work by neutralizing FTAs. A survey-based study by Ren (2010) concluded that the majority of professional interpreters might 'downtone' or omit FTAs in business scenarios. Palazzi (2014), however, reported that interpreting students tended to strengthen or even add FTAs by downtoning the politeness markers expressed by the speaker. Some studies approached this topic with an eye on the gender of interpreters. Nakane (2008) and Mason (2008), interestingly, revealed contrastive findings: the former observed that female interpreters used more politeness markers and honorific expressions than male interpreters; while the latter found, quite counter-intuitively, that they omitted more. Mason (2008) was in a way echoed by Magnifico and Defrancq (2016), which concluded that female interpreters downtoned less than male interpreters at political conferences.

Modification of the politeness degree of an utterance may have consequences for the communicative event. Berk-Seligson (2002) observed that jurors were influenced by the omission or addition of politeness items in the interpreter's rendition of the source speech. Savvalidou (2011) showed that some sign interpreters' strategies resulted in undermining (im)polite statements by a speaker, thus giving the audience an inaccurate impression of the speech. Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2000) and Hu's (2016) case studies on business visits and conferences revealed that the liaison interpreters tended to omit FTAs in their attempts to safeguard the face of the interlocutors, which unfortunately had the effect of heightening misunderstanding and tension.

Most of the above-mentioned studies were based on case studies of either professionals or student interpreters. We believe, however, that it would be more revealing to conduct an empirical study in which the two groups were compared. The mode of interpreting in our study is business liaison interpreting, "the least researched among all specific fields of interpreting" (Ozolins, 2014: 30), protected by "considerations of commercial confidentiality" (Ozolins, 2015: 327). The scant literature on the role of liaison interpreters in sensitive business domains revealed that the interpreters are often expected to play a multiplicity of roles over and above simply transmitting the message (Takimoto, 2006; Gavioli & Maxwell, 2007; Zheng & Xiang, 2018), which suggests that politeness issues feature more prominently in this field (Mason & Stewart, 2001).

The present study attempted an in-depth exploration of the relational and interactional view of politeness by investigating interpreters' processing time and coping strategies of I&Os. The following research questions are addressed: 1) Does the processing of I&Os require extra cognitive effort by professional and student interpreters? 2) What kind of

strategies do they respectively employ to cope with I&Os? and 3) What effects do the strategies exert? It was hoped that, by seeking answers to these questions, the study would give rise to a new perspective on politeness: the interpreters' perspective, so that politeness could be discussed from a broader multilingual and intercultural context.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Subjects**

Twelve professional interpreters (hereinafter as Professionals) and thirteen student interpreters (Students) were enrolled as subjects on a voluntary basis. Professionals were active freelance interpreters in Yangtze River Delta, China and were recruited through two translation agencies. They had an average age of 36.18 years (range=30-45,  $SD=5.06$  years), each with at least three years' professional training, more than eight years' professional interpreting experience in business settings and over 60 paid liaison interpreting services. Students were Year 3 undergraduates specializing in translation and interpreting from a Chinese university, with an average age of 21.73 years (range=21-23,  $SD=0.65$  years). All subjects had Mandarin Chinese as their L1 and English as their L2. They were asked to sign a consent form before the experiment and rewarded with a book voucher for their participation. Based on the post-task reports, we removed three samples<sup>3</sup> from our analysis and labelled the remaining twenty-two subjects as P<sub>1</sub>-P<sub>11</sub> (Professionals) and S<sub>1</sub>-S<sub>11</sub> (Students). This experiment was approved by the research ethics committee of the university.

#### **3.2 Materials**

All the subjects were asked to interpret in turn in two events between two role-played businessmen. The first event featured an initial negotiation on the discount on an order, the second a farewell talk after they had closed a deal, in which the British businessman expressed his appreciation of a painting, and the Chinese insisted on presenting it as a gift. The scenarios were adapted from interpreting samples in *Interpreting Asia, Interpreting Europe* (Xiao & Yang, 2006) in which both I&Os were used. The role play was performed using scripts (minor ad-hoc adjustments were allowed in response to the interpreters' work), to ensure that each subject was presented with the same material for interpreting. The scripts are composed of 146 Chinese characters (13 turns) and 138 English words (12 turns).

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<sup>3</sup> After the experiment, one professional and one student reported having had some acquaintance with the interpreting materials (the unadapted version being available online), and another student failed to finish the task owing to her language incompetence.



### 3.3 Identification of I&Os

The identification of I&Os played a key role in this study. Our first step was to identify all the speech acts that conflicted with the target listeners' expectations, face sensitivities and the interactional wants of both sides (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). Then, after taking 'Western' and 'non-Western' cultural elements into consideration (Gu, 1990; Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2000), we decided to deal solely with positive face-threatening utterances, such as potential insults or the refusal of an offer; while offers, compliments, formality and ceremony were categorized as examples of 'politeness', repetitive offers, urging invitations and exaggerated courtesy were categorized as 'over-politeness' (see Izadi 2016). We then invited 10 Chinese-English bilingual linguists to act as a judging panel to rate the 11 identified I&Os using a 1-9 Likert scale (1 for extreme impoliteness and 9 for extreme over-politeness). The rating scale agreed with our identification: six over-polite utterances (all in Chinese, average score=7.82, range=7-8.5,  $SD=0.63$ ) and five impolite ones (two in Chinese and three in English, average score=2.22, range=1.3-2.7,  $SD=0.55$ ) were identified in this study.

Table 1. Impolite (I<sub>1</sub>-I<sub>5</sub>) and over-polite (O<sub>1</sub>-O<sub>6</sub>) utterances

Categories	Code	Source Utterances (Gloss translation [GT] if in Chinese)	Mean Score
Impolite utterances	I <sub>1</sub>	这老外鬼精鬼精的。(The foreigner is so cunning.)	1.3
	I <sub>2</sub>	我得留一点讨价还价的余地。 (I need some wiggle room for further negotiation.)	2.2
	I <sub>3</sub>	I can't possibly accept such a gift.	2.7
	I <sub>4</sub>	But there is no way that I will take such a gift.	2.6
	I <sub>5</sub>	I feel very awkward about taking this painting.	2.3
Over-polite utterances	O <sub>1</sub>	您老一定累坏了吧? (You, at such a senior age, must be exhausted.)	8.3
	O <sub>2</sub>	既然您太太喜欢, 那就收下吧。(Since your wife is fond of it, take it.)	7.1
	O <sub>3</sub>	我马上派人送到您的酒店去。(I'll have it sent to your hotel immediately.)	8.1
	O <sub>4</sub>	宝物赠知己。(Treasures shall be presented to bosom friends as gifts.)	7
	O <sub>5</sub>	我觉得这幅画也算是找到伯乐了。(I feel that the painting has found its Bole, a horse connoisseur during the Spring and Autumn Period.)	7.9
	O <sub>6</sub>	不行, 您一定要收下。(I will not accept a "No". You must accept it.)	8.5

### 3.4 Procedures

The experiment procedures were set as follows: 1) each subject was introduced to the interlocutors (role-played by two English lecturers, one Chinese native and the other English native), and briefed about the tasks; 2) the subjects interpreted for each interlocutor in turn as the dialogue developed; 3) after the liaison interpreting task, the examiners conducted a one-to-one interview with the subjects, asking them to report

retrospectively on their processing of I&Os. The whole experiment lasted for around 10 minutes for each subject (approximately six minutes for interpreting, and four minutes for retrospection) and was recorded and later transcribed. The recordings of the interpreting were analysed digitally to calculate I&Os processing time; the transcriptions to identify coping strategies and their effects; and the retrospective data to explain how and why decisions were made during interpreting.

### 3.5 Data Processing

#### 3.5.1 Processing time

In this study, processing time works as the measure of the cognitive effort involved in interpreting I&Os. It has been long and commonly considered as a window on the cognitive activity intrinsic to speech production (Goldman-Eisler, 1967; Erman, 2007), and adopted by some scholars as the primary measure of the cognitive effort made for translation and interpreting (McDonald & Carpenter, 1981; Jakobsen et al., 2007). While we acknowledge that this is not the most advanced measurement of cognitive effort, we found it was not feasible to apply more precise neurocognitive methods, such as eye-tracking, EEG and fMRI, in liaison interpreting settings as the ecological validity would be reduced. Arguably, using processing time as the indicator of cognitive effort is a reasonable balance between experimental control and ecological validity.

The measurement of I&Os processing time in itself is by no means clear-cut. Since I&Os were scattered throughout the conversation, we had to determine the beginning and ending of the processing of each instance. Due to the general existence of ear-voice span in interpreting, we decided to include the pause time immediately before delivery and the time taken to deliver the target text in our calculation of processing time (cf. Jakobsen et al., 2007), since pauses are usually seen as a “run-up” to production (Dragsted & Hansen, 2008: 25), signaling the cognitive effort required “to activate the mental structure underlying the subsequent speaking increment” (Schilperoord, 1996: 11). Though some may argue that part of the time was likely to be spent on monitoring the previous production segment, this method got its empirical validation from Zheng and Zhou (2018), which reported that for metaphors dispersed throughout the passage, it bore no statistical difference with the calculation with the reinforcement of the eye-tracking data. If this holds true for sight translation, in which sight translators may have occasional regression activities due to the constant visual interference of the written text (Shreve et al., 2010), we have more reason to believe that interpreters would invest even less effort reviewing the previous segment when they pause, as they are trained to process linearly when confronted with transient acoustic signals.

We then imported all the recorded interpreting materials by the twenty-two subjects into *Audacity 2.0.3* so that they would be represented as oscillograms. Figure 1

represents S<sub>3</sub>'s processing of I<sub>1</sub> (Chinese-to-English, C-E) in Example 1. We started counting immediately after 'percent' (1:57.6) was pronounced and stopped at the last sound of 'tricky' (2:01.5); therefore, the processing time for I<sub>1</sub> was 3.9 seconds (2:01.5-1:57.6 = 3.9).

Example 1. (with I/O in bold)

ST: 九折? **这老外鬼精鬼精的。** 好吧。

[GT: Ten percent off? The foreigner is so cunning. Fine.]

TT: Hmmm ten percent? **Er, this foreigner, this foreigner is too tricky.** OK.

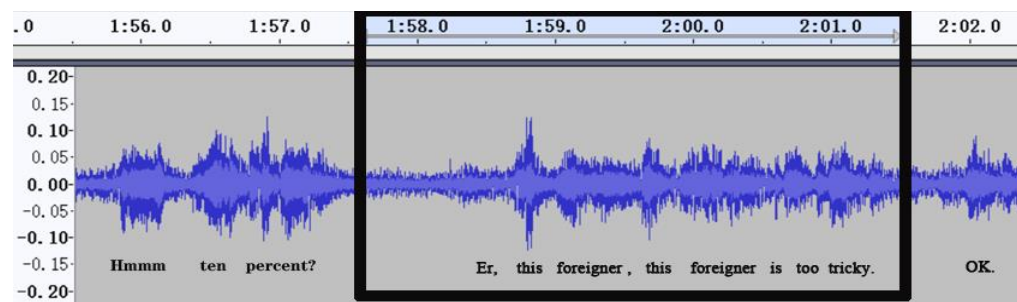


Figure 1. Oscillographic representation of the interpretation of I<sub>1</sub>(C-E)

Figure 2 represents the English-to-Chinese (E-C) interpreting of I<sub>4</sub> in Example 2. The processing time was calculated from the end of '好 (pinyin: hao)' (4:27.6) to that of '画 (pinyin: hua)' (4:30.2), a total of 2.6 seconds (4:30.2- 4:27.6 = 2.6).

Example 2. (with I/O in bold)

ST: It's very kind of you. **But there is no way that I will take such a gift.**

TT: 你真好, **但是我还是不能够收下这幅画。**

[GT: You are so kind, but I still cannot take this painting.]

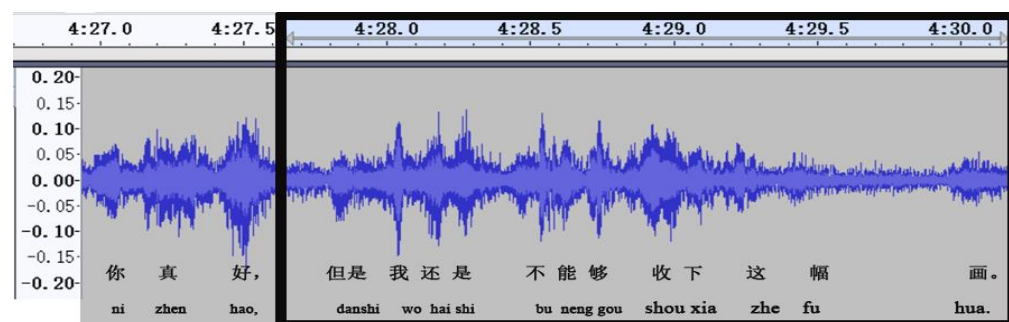


Figure 2. Oscillographic representation of the interpretation of I<sub>4</sub> (E-C)

### 3.5.2 Coping strategies

The second part of our study is product-oriented, in which we compared the different coping strategies employed by Students and Professionals in interpreting I&Os. We deliberately use the term “coping strategies”<sup>4</sup> rather than “interpreting strategies”, since the subjects did not “just interpret”, but simultaneously shouldered the task of coordinating facework by employing strategies beyond interpreting.

Coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, Felberg & Šarić, 2017) are not an entirely new concept in interpreting studies. In Metzger’s (1999) corpus-based study, the interpreters were found to influence the interactive discourse by interruptions, clarifications, and taking the initiative to answer questions from each party themselves. Other strategies observed by previous researchers included: the control of turn-taking (Roy, 2000), borrowing, substitution, addition, omission (Ivir, 1998), paraphrasing (Savvalidou, 2011), translation style (Napier 2016), the use of honorifics (Nakane, 2008), politeness markers (Mason, 2008; Palazzi, 2014), modality, register (Mason & Stewart, 2001) and hedges (Magnifico & Defrancq, 2017).

In our study, we first excluded five incomplete interpretations, such as S<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> (“if you like it, I’ll...”). The remaining 237 instances of I&O (117 for Students and 120 for Professionals) were then compared one-by-one with the source texts to examine their closeness or deviation, and this formed the basis for our categorization of the coping strategies. The categorized strategies were then compared and analysed.

## **4. Results**

In our analysis of the interpreter’s treatment of I&Os, process and product-oriented approaches were integrated, for both of which two sets of variables were investigated, namely, the translation directionality (C-E VS. E-C), and the two extremes of politeness (impoliteness VS. over-politeness). As Table 1 reveals, there are two utterances in Chinese and three in English labelled as impoliteness, and an additional six in Chinese as over-politeness. Thus, the processing speed for impoliteness and over-politeness would not be exactly comparable as there is no English counterpart in over-polite utterances. Accordingly, we focused on the directionality in the first part. For the product-based analysis, however, our focus shifted to the comparison between impoliteness and over-politeness, as the impact of directionality was automatically encompassed in the discussion over impoliteness.

### **4.1 Cognitive effort involved in the treatment of I&Os**

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<sup>4</sup> The term “coping strategies” does not include literal interpreting in this study.

We tried to tap into the process of the interpreters' treatment of I&Os by examining the cognitive effort involved, as represented by I&Os' processing time by each group. It has been testified that culturally embedded or pragmatically laden expressions entail more processing time, such as idioms and metaphorical expressions (Jakobsen et al., 2007; Zheng & Zhou, 2018). We aim to find out whether the same trend would apply for I&Os.

Table 2 is based on our calculation of the **Processing Time** spent on interpreting **Per Word** (PTPW), with the word count based on the transcription of the oral outputs. For example, in I<sub>1</sub> above, the PTPW=3.9sec/8words=0.49 sec/word. For E-C interpreting as in Example 2, the platform of THULAC (<http://thulac.thunlp.org>) was chosen for counting the word number of the Chinese transcription: for “但是我还是不能够收下这幅画” the PTPW was 2.6 sec/9 words=0.29 sec/word.

With the aim of exploring whether the inclusion of I&Os had an impact on the subjects' processing time we conducted a paired t-test to compare the PTPW of I&Os with that of the whole text (i.e. the accumulated turns) in the same direction of interpreting.

Table 2. A comparative PTPW analysis between I&Os and the whole texts

	Chinese-to-English	English-to-Chinese
PTPW_ I&Os	0.54	0.54
PTPW_text	0.47	0.53
t-test, <i>p</i> =	0.02*	0.36

PTPW\_I&Os: the mean value of PTPW in interpreting I&Os

PTPW\_text: the mean value of PTPW in interpreting the whole text

(\* *p*<.05)

As Table 2 shows, in C-E interpreting, the interpreters spent significantly more time on interpreting I&Os than on interpreting the whole text (0.54 vs 0.47, *p*<.05), indicating that more complex cognitive activities were herein involved; however, no significant difference was witnessed for English to Chinese interpreting (0.54 vs 0.53, *p*>.05). Another paired t-test was performed to distinguish between the two groups involved.

Table 3. PTPW analysis of Students and Professionals

	Chinese-to-English		English-to-Chinese	
	PTPW_I&Os	PTPW_text	PTPW_I&Os	PTPW_text
Students	0.62	0.48	0.54	0.59
Professionals	0.46	0.45	0.54	0.46
t-test, <i>p</i> =	0.00**	0.18	0.48	0.00**

<sup>5</sup> This sentence is counted as 9 words: ‘但是’ ‘我’ ‘还是’ ‘不’ ‘能够’ ‘收下’ ‘这’ ‘幅’ ‘画’[GT: But / I / still / not / can / take / this / piece of / painting].

(\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ )

A closer examination of Table 2 and Table 3 reveals more interesting findings: 1) During C-E interpreting, Students were actually the only group whose processing was hindered: their PTPW of the whole text was 0.48, while that for I&Os was prolonged to 0.62. The result was supported by their retrospections: for example, “some of them were really tricky, and I was at a loss how to convey the subtle tone into English” (S<sub>3</sub>); “I found it particularly challenging to put the Chinese one into English, maybe because English is not my mother tongue” (S<sub>6</sub>). The performance of Professionals, by contrast, was barely affected at all, as shown by the ratio of 0.45 to 0.46. When compared vertically, Professionals processed significantly faster than Students (0.46 vs 0.62). 2) In E-C interpreting, Students exhibited an opposite trend: their processing of I&Os was faster than that for the whole text (0.54 vs 0.59); Professionals, however, were slower in this respect (0.54 vs 0.46). When compared vertically with Students, they achieved the same PTPW for I&Os (0.54); however, considering that their E-C PTPW of the whole text was significantly faster (0.46 vs 0.59), they had obviously experienced some difficult choices herein. Their retrospective reports were then referred to for possible explanations: the typical examples being “these expressions might be regarded as inappropriate by the Chinese side” (P<sub>1</sub>); “I had to weigh whether they are acceptable in the target language, and if not, how to make them better received” (P<sub>9</sub>). From the above, it is safe to conclude that while Students were more concerned with the linguistic level, and thus found the C-E interpreting of I&Os more challenging and effort-consuming, Professionals were much more sensitive to the potential pragmatic effects of politeness, and spontaneously shouldered the responsibility for coordinating and facilitating the interaction. Also, compared with Students, Professionals in this study seemed more careful with their Chinese employer’s face.

The analysis of the processing time also considers cases where no processing time was invested, that is, omission (the whole I/O being omitted), a solution frequently resorted to by all subjects (22.1% by Students and 30.5% by Professionals). A Mann-Whiney test indicated that the number of zero interpreting of I/O was greater for Professionals (Median=3) than for Students (Median=2), however, the difference was not significant, with  $U=35$ ,  $p=.087$ .

#### **4.2 Coping strategies applied in the treatment of I&Os**

In the second part of our study, we dugged into the repertoire of the translation products for the identification and categorization of the coping strategies of I&Os. Not surprisingly, when confronted with such potentially FTAs, the subjects spontaneously adopted a multitude of strategies and actively coordinated the facework.

Our first interest lay in the subjects' frequent use of the controversial strategy of omission. Having been traditionally defined as an error of performance, it has recently been argued from a pragmatic perspective that omissions are a conscious decision and positive coping strategy to ensure effective interpretations (Wadensjö, 1998; Napier, 2016). We hold that they could be both, and argue that the most effective way to distinguish between errors and strategies would be to dig into the subjects' retrospective reports. Table 4 lists the four categories of the groups' omissions based on Napier's (2016: 64) omission taxonomy<sup>6</sup>.

Table 4. Categorization of omissions by Students and Professionals

Omission types	Operational Definition	Students	Quotes from retrospections	Professionals	Quotes from retrospections
Conscious strategic	made consciously to enhance the effectiveness of the interpretation, or to coordinate facework in this case.	6 (23.1%)	"may sound impolite if translated"; "rude"; "too straightforward"	29 (76.3%)	"unnecessary to be heard"; "may offend the other side"; "couldn't facilitate the communication if translated"
Conscious intentional	caused by a lack of understanding of a particular lexical item or an inability to think of an appropriate equivalence in the target language.	15 (57.7%)	"didn't know how to translate '鬼精'; "didn't how to deal with '伯乐' as its culture-embedded "	2 (5.3%)	"couldn't at that time come up with an equivalent for '鬼精'"
Conscious unintentional	caused by memory lapses and failure to choose the optimal moment for interpreting.	4 (15.4%)	"was about to translate but then forgot it", "more words poured in before I could react"	4 (10.5%)	"missed it because of the lag time"; "waited for more contextual information and then forgot about it"
Unconscious	caused by the interpreter's not hearing or noticing the particular lexical item.	1 (3.8%)	"didn't notice it"	3 (7.9%)	"cannot recall hearing it"
Total		26		38	

<sup>6</sup> One of Napier's five categories, "Conscious receptive" which occurs when the interpreter fails to decipher what was heard owing to reported poor sound quality, was not identified from our subjects' retrospections.

Overall, Professionals used omission much more liberally than Students (38:26). As shown by Table 4, the overriding majority of Professionals (76.3%) resorted to omission as a conscious strategy in their attempt to protect the interlocutors' faces and facilitate the communication, while most of Students' omissions fell into the conscious intentional category (57.7%), being hasty options in the face of a cognitive overload, caused by their vain attempts to deliver appropriate equivalences in the target language on the spot.

Besides omission, various coping strategies were employed in the treatment of I&Os, which we grouped into lexical and syntactic strategies (Trosborg, 1995: 209). Lexical strategies include politeness markers—such as 'please', 'sorry'; lexical hedges—such as 'seem', 'perhaps', '有点 (kinda)' etc.; avoidance—the non-rendition of certain sensitive words as '您老 (you at such a senior age)'; negative-positive shift of lexical meaning—such as reversing '鬼精鬼精 (cunning)' into 'a smart businessman/wise'. Syntactic strategies, on the other hand, include question forms, conditional clauses, modals, the subjunctive mood, epistemic hedges—such as 'I think', 'we assume'. Examples of various coping strategies are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Interpreting versions and strategies adopted in O<sub>1</sub>

Interpreting versions: <i>您老一定累坏了吧?</i> (GT: You, at such a senior age, must be exhausted?)	Strategies applied (L)* for lexical strategy (S) for Syntactic strategy	Representative Subjects
V1 <u>You</u> must be very tired.	(L) avoidance	P <sub>2</sub> , S <sub>4</sub>
V2 <u>Do</u> you feel <u>tired</u> ? / <u>Are</u> you tired?	(S) modality, (L) downgrader,	S <sub>11</sub> , P <sub>1</sub>
V3 <u>I think</u> you must be <u>tired</u> .	(S) hedge, (L) downgrader	P <sub>2</sub>
V4 <u>I feel</u> , <u>I hope</u> you've enjoyed your trip.	(S) hedge, (S) adoption of greetings accustomed to the target culture	P <sub>10</sub>

\*L stands for lexical strategies, while S for syntactic ones.

The number of the two streams of coping strategies, together with that of literal interpreting used by both groups is presented in Table 6, with a follow-up Mann-Whitney test presented in Table 7.

Table 6. Number of literal interpreting and coping strategies by Students and Professionals

Strategies	Students	Professionals	Top 5 strategies
<b>Literal Interpreting</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>12</b>	
<b>Lexical Coping Strategies</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>82</b>	
addition	7	7	
avoidance	21	8	ST1*
downgrader	9	18	ST4, PT3



lexical hedges	10	27	ST2, PT1
negative-positive shift of meaning	9	1	ST4
politeness marker	1	20	PT2
upgrader	6	1	
<b>Syntactic Coping Strategies</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>72</b>	
addition	1	5	
adoption of greetings accustomed to the target culture	0	11	PT5
change from statements to questions	3	1	
change of subject from sb. to sth./it/there	2	3	
change of subject from 'you' to 'I/we'	6	3	
conditional clause	4	8	
distancing	0	7	
epistemic hedges	1	14	PT4
explanation of cultural differences	0	5	
modals	10	7	ST2
unsolicited suggestion	0	3	
subjunctive mood	2	5	

\*ST1-ST5 stands for Students' Top 5 strategies; PT1-PT5 for Professionals'.

Table 7. Median and Mann Whitney test on the three streams of strategies used by Students and Professionals

	<b>Literal interpreting</b>	<b>Lexical coping strategies</b>	<b>Syntactic coping strategies</b>
Students	3	5	2
Professionals	1	7	6
Mann Whitney test	U=3, p=.000	U=33, p=.068	U=12.5, p=.001

It is evident that both Students and Professionals were conscious of politeness-related issues and adopted active intervention strategies. Only 28.1% (36/128) of the solutions by Students were literal interpreting, and the percentage was even lower for Professionals: a mere 7.2% (12/166). Considering that literal interpreting is the only option in line with the norms governing the interpreting profession, the scant use of it in our study is clear evidence that the interpreters (Professionals in particular) were sensitive to the face needs of the interlocutors and themselves and at times switched to a coordinator's role, negotiating face during the event.

The two groups also showed interesting divergences that can deepen our understanding of pragmatic competence in interpreting. To start with, Professionals appeared to be more sensitive to facework than Students and more prepared to shoulder the responsibility for coordinating, since they employed significantly more non-interpreting

strategies, especially at the syntactic level. As revealed by Table 7, Professionals (median=1) applied significantly less literal interpreting strategies than Students (median=3) ( $U=3$ ,  $p=.000$ ); but significantly more syntactic coping strategies ( $U=12.5$ ,  $p=.001$ ). Regarding the lexical coping strategies, Professionals also had a greater number (median=7) than Students (median=5), while the difference was not significant ( $U=33$ ,  $p=.068$ ). On the whole, they were bolder and less constrained by sentence structures than Students, probably as a result of their better command of the languages. Students, by contrast, seemed more comfortable with minor adjustments than structural reconstructing, given the limited time and resources.

The Top 5 strategies used by each group intrigued us as well. Apart from the preference for lexical hedges and lexical downgraders common to both groups, their Top 5 lists took on wholly different looks. As revealed by Table 6, Professionals' PT2, PT4 and PT5 strategies, namely, politeness markers, epistemic hedges and adoption of greetings accustomed to the target culture, were used hardly at all by Students. In the same vein, Students' ST4 strategy, namely the negative-positive shift of meaning, which was used in extreme cases where the face-threatening tone was thinly veiled ( $I_5$  as a typical example), was seldom used by Professionals.

The last observation worthy of attention is that Professionals showed more concern over their own face than Students did, as evidenced in their treatment of  $O_6$ ,  $I_4$  and  $I_5$ : when the Chinese businessman repeatedly urged his guest to take the gift, the strategy of "distancing" was consciously employed. By adopting frame devices such as "but he insists that...", "he says...", Professionals made explicit their non-responsibility for the potentially face-threatening request/refusal; this was confirmed in the rationales given in their retrospective reports, such as "I don't want to offend the client myself" ( $P_8$ ), and "I don't want to sound pushy or imposing" ( $P_6$ ).

### 4.3 The effects of coping strategies

To evaluate the effects of these non-interpreting interventions, we invited the judging panel who had rated the 11 I&Os in the source text to rate the 237 pieces of target text using the same 1-9 Likert scale. The ratings were then compared one-by-one with those for the source text, to find out whether they were increased or decreased. If increased, the target text of I&Os was labelled "Aggravating"; if decreased, "Mitigating"; if remaining unchanged, "Retaining"; or, if judged by more than half of the panel as having failed to fulfill the communicative goal of the original text, it was labelled "Deviating". Examples of all these classifications are presented in Table 8. All the strategies used to treat the 237 instances of I&O were then assessed for their effects, the results being presented in Table 9.

Table 8. Coping strategies used in the case of I<sub>5</sub> interpreting and their effects

Subjects	ST: I feel very awkward taking this painting.	Strategies applied (L) for lexical strategy (S) for syntactic strategy	Effects of the strategies
P <sub>2</sub>	这老外可能真的不要。可能你还是不要勉强他。我看，咱们的中国礼仪在很多地方老外还说不一定能接受的。我告诉你。你看看吧。 (GT: The foreigner may not want it. I don't think it's a good idea to push him. You know, not all our Chinese customs are necessarily accepted by the Westerns. You have my word here. See by yourself.)	(S) distancing, (S) unsolicited suggestion, (S) explanation of cultural differences, (S) imperative sentence	Retaining Aggravating Mitigating Aggravating
P <sub>11</sub>	我觉得收下这个礼物有点，呃…不好意思… (GT: Well, I feel a bit, er... a bit uneasy taking this painting.)	(S) hedge, (L) hedge, (L) downgrader	Mitigating Mitigating Mitigating
S <sub>1</sub>	如果我收下的话，我真是太坏了。 (GT: If I take it, it will be too bad of me.)	(S) conditional clause, (L) upgrader	Mitigating Aggravating
S <sub>2</sub>	嗯，我感到很荣幸收下这幅画。 (GT: It's my great honour taking this painting.)	(L) negative-positive shift of lexical meaning	Deviating

Table 9. Effects of the coping strategies employed by Students and Professionals

	Students		Professionals	
	Impolite utterances	Over-polite utterances	Impolite utterances	Over-polite utterances
Retaining	2 (3.4%)	1 (2.9%)	2 (2.6%)	1 (1.3%)
Mitigating	44 (75.9%)	26 (76.3%)	72 (92.3%)	73 (96.1%)
Aggravating	6 (10.3%)	3 (8.8%)	3 (3.8%)	2 (2.6%)
Deviating	6 (10.3%)	4 (11.8%)	1 (1.3%)	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>76</b>

Two points stand out. Firstly, Students adopted fewer coping strategies than Professionals (92 vs. 154), especially when dealing with over-polite utterances (34 vs. 76). Besides the self-evident fact that Professionals were more conscious of and certain about their own role of coordinating the facework, we may also safely conclude that, while Professionals were equally concerned with impolite and over-polite utterances (78 vs. 76), Students were more sensitive towards impolite utterances than over-polite ones (58 vs. 34), which may indicate that the latter sound less offending to their ears.

Secondly, the majority of the coping strategies (75.9%-96.1%) employed by both groups succeeded in mitigating the face-threatening force of the utterances, with the percentage for Professionals being higher than 90%, showing that they were aware of the strategies and their intentions, and able to navigate towards the intentions. The other

three effects were rare. However, the “Deviating” and “Aggravating” effects aroused our curiosity, since they seemed to run counter to instinct. Students were found to be more likely to deviate from or even go against the interlocutors’ intention in extreme cases in their eagerness to erase the face-threatening tone (I<sub>5</sub> as mentioned above). The examination of “Aggravating” also uncovered differences between the two groups: for Students, the aggravating effect was achieved in most cases by the use of lexical upgraders (‘cannot’ altered to ‘must not’, for instance), and their retrospective reports revealed that they had not deliberately tried to attenuate the face-threatening force, but had simply failed to come up with an accurate equivalence or even had not noticed the subtle differences. The five aggravating strategies used by Professionals, interestingly, were all employed by the same subject (P<sub>2</sub>) and were regarded by the judging panel as a deliberate choice. Despite his good intentions, the strategies he employed in his attempt to explain cultural differences – imperative sentences, and unsolicited suggestions – risked threatening the Chinese businessman’s positive face, as they might be taken as implying the businessman’s ignorance of Western etiquette.

## **5. Discussion**

Our analysis of the professional and student interpreters’ handling of I&Os shows that the differences were caused more by the extent to which the interpreters related to the situational and cultural contexts (Feng 2019) and made on-the-spot interpretations of the interlocutors’ message, than by how well they understood the literal meaning of the SL and recoded it into the TL. Contextual factors, including both situational factors such as the nature of the activity and the relations between the interlocutors, and cultural factors such as different face expectations and different conventions of politeness expressions, require interpreters to constantly consider the pragmatic implications of their work (Krouglov, 1999). By relating the interpreters’ pragmatic competence to their cognitive effort and coping strategies, our study provides new understandings of politeness in intercultural communication, as elaborated in in Section 5.1 and 5.2.

### **5.1 Cognitive effort in the treatment of I&Os**

The extra cognitive effort involved in the processing of I&Os is a straightforward evidence of the interpreters’ consideration of contextual factors. Levy (1988) considered translation and interpreting as a decision process, in which the translator/interpreter is forced to choose among a certain number of alternatives, and pointed out that the decision process is influenced by factors that are highly pragmatic under the guidance of the so-called “minimax strategy”, i.e. choice for the one of the possible alternatives that yields maximum effect with minimum effort (1988: 48). In the cases of I&Os, it is to be expected that they require from the interpreter a higher level of pragmatic competence in the decision-making

process than other expressions, as they tend to contradict the expectation of the hearer and put the interpersonal relationship at risk. Departing from Levy's minimax strategy, interpreters' pragmatic competence is construed as higher efficiency/less processing time with better effects.

One evidence of the interpreters' balancing between effort and effects lies in their strategic use of omission. Professionals were found to omit I&Os much more liberally and intentionally than Students. By omitting the I&Os and thus exerting minimal effort, Professionals in our study achieved maximum effect, as they protected the hearer from statements with potentially undesirable effects. This finding is partly compatible with Felberg and Šarić (2017), which observed that omission is used infrequently by public service interpreters, but when used, it is assumed to be a conscious strategy or even a technical necessity. They explained that professional interpreters' deliberate choice of omission was owing to the priority they gave to the broader moral order of being polite over that of fidelity as prescribed by interpreters' codes of ethics.

In the instances where omission was not used, the processing speed for both groups was slowed, a strong indicator that more cognitive effort was required in the treatment of I&Os. This result echoes the similar studies on culturally embedded expressions (Jakobsen et al., 2007; Zheng & Zhou, 2018), confirms our assumption that I&Os are more cognitively demanding in interpreter-mediated events, and at the same time reveals that both Professionals and Students had some pragmatic awareness that these utterances needed to be treated more carefully. The results also show that Professionals were mainly slowed down in E-C interpreting, caused by contextual considerations, namely, their concern over the interlocutors' face, especially that of the Chinese employer, while Students were mainly hindered in C-E interpreting, mostly due to their inability to come up with equivalences for particular Chinese terms. Hence, we can safely conclude that Professionals had more contextual awareness and pragmatic competence than Students when interpreting I&Os. Our findings regarding omission and processing time complement Rafieyan's (2016) findings that translators with a higher ability to comprehend and interpret the pragmatic perspectives of the SL are equally well equipped with the ability required to present these pragmatic perspectives in the TL, which helps minimise the processing effort by the target readers. Our study moves one step further by revealing that Professionals, as the group with the higher pragmatic competence, were able to minimise their own processing effort in their simultaneous analysis of the source text message and the communicative context of the target language.

## **5.2 Coping strategies and their effects**

Both groups of interpreters in this study were aware of the contextual factors and competent to make pragmatic interventions towards the desired communicative effect, as evidenced by their deliberate employment of various coping strategies other than literal interpreting when dealing with the I&Os. The differences between the groups were mainly exhibited in the way that Professionals used the strategies (syntactic ones and omission in particular) more boldly and intentionally, while Students were more reserved, using significantly more literal interpreting and less coping strategies. This divergence may again find its explanation in the conflict between moral orders and norms. In the cases of FTAs such as I&Os, the requirement to translate literally conflicts with the fact that languages do not encode politeness in strictly equivalent ways (Mason & Stewart, 2001). Whether an interpreter should give priority to the professional norm of faithfulness or to the social norm of politeness in the target culture is determined by the interpreter's on-the-spot assessment of the linguistic, situational and cultural elements and the communicative goals of the interactional occasion. With more experience and higher levels of pragmatic awareness/competence derived from that experience, Professionals were more flexible in their use of strategies to reduce the intensity of impoliteness and over-politeness and to negotiate facework.

Another interesting finding is that two of Professionals' Top 5 strategies, politeness markers and the adoption of greetings accustomed to the target culture, were used hardly by Students. The frequent spontaneous addition of politeness markers such as 'please', 'I'm sorry' speaks for itself, indicating that Professionals assumed English speakers to be generally 'more polite' based on sets of rules of conduct elaborated by English society (Krouglov, 1999), and were willing to make adjustments accordingly in their concern over the interlocutors' face needs. The replacement of greetings accustomed in the source culture with those in the target culture was also a behaviour peculiar to Professionals. Conscious of the discrepancies between Chinese and English conventions (e.g., in declining gifts, cf. Wang, 2001), they jumped out of the role of interpreter, chose a more acceptable way to convey the greetings (and in some other cases, added cultural explanations to the interlocutors for the same purpose). These two strategies confirmed our observation that Professionals, with their higher pragmatic competence, were more aware that politeness might be perceived differently in different cultures than Students. They were able to better understand the original text and the cultural elements embedded, instantly felt the need to act as cultural clarifiers or cultural informants, and spontaneously mediated in a way that would provide the target text with sufficient contextual support to facilitate communication. In other words, they attached equal importance to situational and cultural constraints and were willing and competent to intervene under them. Students, by contrast, seemed to consider the situational context more than the cultural context, or, as suggested by some of their retrospections, did notice the cultural elements

but could not spare the effort to make necessary coordination owing to the limits of time and their cognitive resources.

The interpreters' interventions yielded expected results: the overriding majority of their coping strategies succeeded in mitigating the face-threatening force implied in the utterances, with only a few exceptions when they aggravated or retained the force or deviated from the purpose of the communication. This observation runs counter to Krouglov's (1999) finding that the addition of particles or polite forms by police interpreters can lead to an inaccurate perception and possibly even the loss of important information in police investigations. The discrepancy between the two studies may be caused by the nature of the interaction being interpreted and by the clients' expectations in a particular setting (Ciordia, 2016), and in turn highlights the importance of situational context, in which the purposes of the activities, and the nature of the relationship between interpreters and clients may have an impact on how interpreters make interventions and what effect the interventions exert.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study investigates how impolite and over-politeness utterances were interpreted and coordinated by professional and student interpreters. Our results suggest that: Firstly, impolite and over-polite utterances did slow down the interpreters' processing speed, which in turn suggests that more cognitive effort was entailed in dealing with them than with the rest of the dialogue. Professionals were mainly affected in the E-C direction due to their concern over the Chinese employer's face, while Students were more affected in the opposite direction due to their lower command of the English language. Secondly, various coping strategies beyond the scope of literal interpreting were adopted by both groups. Compared with Students, Professionals tended to use strategies more generously and intentionally, especially syntactic ones and omission. Thirdly, the coping strategies used by the interpreters, especially Professionals, yielded positive outcomes: the face-threatening tone was successfully mitigated in most cases.

As an attempt to integrate pragmatics into the analysis of interpreters' treatment of I&Os, this study sheds new lights on interlingual politeness and interpreter's role. On the one hand, it challenges the static and pre-defined notion of politeness and offers new possibilities for looking at politeness as dynamically co-constructed from an interlingual and cross-cultural perspective; on the other hand, by introducing the concept of "intercultural pragmatic competence" into interpreting studies, this study highlights the complexity of the interpreter's dual role of interpreting and coordinating. One of the crucial implications of raising an interpreter's perspective of politeness is how developments in this field can be used to help reconstitute interpreter training as an intercultural endeavour. The comparison between Professionals and Students' performance suggests the

necessity for fostering interpreters' pragmatic awareness and competence as part of interpreters' skill set, which would contribute to the professionalization of liaison interpreters so as to better satisfy the clients' expectations.

There are a few caveats that we feel obliged to make. To start with, processing time alone may not be an adequate indicator of cognitive load; meanwhile, this empirical study was relatively limited in scope, with only 11 I&Os being analysed. However, it is clear that there is a need for a greater synthesis between pragmatics and interpreting studies. Corroborating studies need to be carried out on a larger scale and supported by broader streams of data.



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